

BOURKE (J.G.)

Distillation by
Early American Indians?



DISTILLATION BY EARLY AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY CAPTAIN JOHN G. BOURKE, U. S. A.

In the *Anthropologist* for January, 1893, there was published a brief description of a visit made to Lake Patzcuaro, in the state of Michoacan, western Mexico, in which I commented upon some very primitive methods of distillation in use among the Tarasco Indians of that region.

In that article reference was made to the decidedly aboriginal type of the apparatus employed and to the fact that the natives of Mexico have for centuries been celebrated for their skill in making liquors from the maguey, nopal, mesquite, and maize. Most of these liquors are made by fermentation. Nevertheless, there seems to me to be much to support the idea that the American Indian—at least the Aztec—had some acquaintance with rude processes of distillation not taught him by the European.

The following quotations bear upon the drinks of the Indians as noted by the first discoverers.

Columbus observed that the Indians of Veragua, on the north coast of South America, not only used corn as food, but made of it a drink resembling English beer, with which they mixed various spices. This was the same as the tizwin of the Apaches of Arizona, who are so extremely fond of it that they ignore or defy all ordinances made for its suppression. Tizwin formerly figured prominently in all the Apache ceremonial dances and preparations for the warpath; so much so that twenty or twenty-five years ago, when officers learned that the Apaches were indulging in a "tizwin drunk" they knew that mischief was afoot. My own opinion, as expressed elsewhere, was that it was their sacred intoxicant.

Tizwin differs somewhat from the sour drink made by the Cherokees from corn-meal gruel and regarded by them as very palatable and refreshing in sultry weather.

Columbus describes not only tizwin, but also mescal, the favorite alcoholic stimulant of the Mexican Indians of today.



It is now quite well understood that there are two classes of liquor obtained from the maguey, or American aloe. The sap, or "miel," when allowed to ferment becomes the beer-like "pulque," which is consumed in enormous quantities. The center stalk or heart of the plant, first baked and allowed to ferment and then distilled, furnishes "mescal." It was this latter which Columbus probably saw. It is expressly stated that the juice of the marrow of the trunk was *boiled* with water and spices. But we can let the life of Columbus supply the words:

"Se nourrissent de Maiz qui vient en épy comme du millet, et en font une liqueur semblable à la cervoise d'Angleterre, en y mêlant quelques épiceries qui luy donnent le goust du Rape. Ils en font une autre avec une sorte d'arbre plein de longues épines; ils prennent la mouelle du tronc, la pressent, et en expriment le suc qui ayant bouilly avec de l'eau et des épiceries, compose une boisson qu'ils estiment beaucoup." (Life of Columbus, by his son Fernando, Paris, 1571, second part, p. 197.)

Closely following Columbus came the Emperor Charles V, who spoke as follows of the Indians of New Spain (Mexico), within ten years after Cortez had made himself master of Tenochtitlan:

"The Indians of New Spain make use of a drink called pulque, which is distilled by the magueys, plants of great value for certain purposes, and when drunk in moderation its use may be tolerated, since they have always been accustomed to it; but it has been noted that great harm and danger have been occasioned by their manner of doctoring it by the introduction of various ingredients noxious to spiritual and temporal health, since, under pretense of preserving it and keeping it from corruption, they mix with it certain roots, boiling water, and lime, which impart so much additional strength that it deprives them of their senses, inflames the principal members of the body, sickens, stupefies, and kills them with the greatest facility, and, what is still more to be deplored, being thus alienated, they commit idolatries, return to the ceremonies and sacrifices of paganism, engage in furious altercations, deprive themselves of life, and commit many carnal, scandalous, and incestuous vices, for the suppression of which the ecclesiastical authorities have been compelled to fulminate censures."*

* "Usan los Indios de la Nueva España de una bebida, llamada pulque, que destilan los magueyes, plantas de much beneficio para diferentes efectos, y aunque beberla con templanza, se podria tolerar, porque ya estan acostumbrados à ella, se han experimentado notables daños, y perjuicios de la forma con que la confeccionan, introduciendole algunos

This edict will bear a great deal of scrutiny. While the term "pulque" is used and the whole thing may be taken as an ordinance for the suppression of pulque debauches, yet the word "destilan" also appears, and may be translated "distilled by, or from, the magueys."

But it is to another statement that attention should be especially invited—the adulteration of this drink with lime-water and various noxious roots. The very same thing is done along the Rio Grande in Texas today. The mescal sold in the "cantinas" of the little towns in southern Texas, as well as in northern Mexico, is diluted with lime-water and has added to it several kinds of roots and berries, the most important being the chilchipin, said to be the basis of the fiery Tabasco sauce. If we admit that within less than ten years after the conquest of Mexico the Spaniards had taught the aborigines the secrets of distillation, then it is only fair that we should also concede that the Spaniards had familiarized themselves with roots and berries previously unknown to them and taught the natives to add them to the new beverages. The use of tizwin, pulque, or their analogue, beer, in sacred ceremonies was not confined to the New World.

Speaking of the labors of the Irish monks, Saints Gall and Columbanus, among the Teutons near the head of the Rhine and not far from Lake Zug, in Switzerland (about A. D. 590-610), Montalembert says: "Sometimes they broke the boilers in which the pagans prepared beer to offer as a sacrifice to Woden."*

ingredientes nocivos à la salud espiritual y temporal, pues con pretexto de conservarla, y que no se corrum pa, la mezcla con ciertas raizes, agua hirviendo, y cal; con que toma tanta fuerza, que les obliga à perder el sentido, abrasa los miembros principales del cuerpo, y los enferna, entorpece, y mata con grandissima facilidad, y lo que mas es, estando enagenados, cometan idolatrias, hazen ceremonias, y sacrificios de la Gentilidad, y furiosos traban pendencias, y se quitan la vida, cometiendo muchos vicios carnales, nefandos, e incestuosos, con que han obligado à que los Prelados Ecclesiasticos fulminen censuras." (Law XXXVII, Charles V, Toledo, August 24th, 1529.) To be found in "Recopilacion de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias," Madrid, 1681. Julian de Parédes. (Copy now in Newberry Library, Chicago.

* "Monks of the West," English edition, London, 1861, vol. 2, p. 430.



